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ABSTRACT

The "cooling-out" phenomenon at community colleges refers to an institutional process of encouraging students whose academic aspirations exceed their abilities to move out of transfer programs and into terminal degree programs. Critics claim that the cooling-out process is unfair, arguing that its basis on meritocratic principles of fairness favors students of social privilege. To determine if the cooling-out process denied access to the transfer degree for students from particular segments of society, a study was conducted using a sample of 103 African American and 96 white students from a Florida community college who had earned either an associate of science degree or an associate of arts degree between winter 1984 and fall 1991. Students in the sample were determined to have been exposed to the cooling-out process if they had expressed an intention to earn an associate of arts degree upon entrance but were subsequently placed into one or more college preparatory courses based on pre-entrance examination scores. Results indicated that while access to the transfer degree appeared to be unrelated to the socioeconomic status, race, and gender of students, the probability of being cooled-out increased as student age increased. The results suggest that community college faculty should increase their awareness of cultural capital and its relationship to college mission. Contains 26 references. (TGI)

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PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A MERITOCRATIC ANALYSIS OF BURTON CLARK'S COOLING-OUT PROCESS

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Abstract
This paper explores practical pedagogical implications for community college faculty of a study that measured the cooling-out process using a meritocratic definition of fairness to determine if this process denied access to the transfer degree to students from particular segments of society. Analysis of this study's results supports the meritocratic supposition that access to the transfer degree appears to be unrelated to the socio-economic status, race, and gender of students in the cooling-out process. The finding that older students were more likely to be cooled out than younger students, however, lends support to some key critical theory tenets and calls into question whether older students in the cooling-out process are being unfairly denied access to the transfer degree.

Introduction

The community college movement has possessed from its beginnings in Joliet, Illinois, "great potential for facilitating universal access to higher education" (Rudolph, 1987, p. 284). Such access is often tied to the "general principle of free public education as the right and need of all youth who can profit by it" (Bogue, 1950, p. 9) and as "a partial realization of the democratic ideal that secondary school and college education should be available to everyone" (Brick, 1964, p. 5). The open-door admission policy is a cornerstone upon which the community college's commitment to access has been built. By way of this policy, students who year after year are less likely to be the traditional young, white, middle class male can gain admission into community colleges where they have the opportunity to improve their skills and possibly earn postsecondary degrees.

Some critics of community colleges, typically critical theorists, however, see the community college as being less a conduit for access and more a barrier that society has constructed to check the ambition of the nontraditional student. They argue that a student's demographic makeup plays a significant role in determining if a student will be "cooled out" during his or her tenure at a community college, if a student will have his or her opportunity for social advancement through educational attainment impeded by factors extraneous to academic ability.

Theoretical Background

The cooling-out process has received considerable attention within the higher education community since it was first defined by Burton Clark (1960a, 1960b, 1980) as a covert institutional process designed to encourage community college students whose academic aspirations exceed their academic abilities to move out of the transfer degree program and into a terminal degree program. Much of this attention has focused on whether this process is fair.

Clark purports that academic ability and accumulative record determine who will and who will not be cooled out. As such, the cooling-out process is built on meritocratic principles and can be judged against a meritocratic definition of fairness. The cooling-out process is fair according to meritocratic principles if factors extraneous to academic ability do not significantly predict which students are cooled out (Hearn, 1984; Rehberg & Rosenthal, 1978). If the cooling-out process is fair, community colleges arguably have not denied cooled-out students access to the transfer degree; community colleges have upheld their responsibility to provide cooled-out students educational opportunity equal to that provided students earning the transfer degree since equal educational opportunity exists as long as the distribution of educational resources is proportional to the students' relative academic abilities (Brubacher, 1982; Feinberg, 1975; Giarelli & Webb, 1980; Herrnstein, 1971).

Critical theorists, however, see the cooling-out process as less than equitable precisely because it aspires to meritocratic principles (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brint & Karabel, 1989a; Brint & Karabel, 1989b; Karabel, 1972; London, 1978; Zwerling, 1976). They take issue with a core assumption of meritocracy: the notion of valid measures of student academic ability (Archbald & Newman, 1988; Bowles, 1971; Carnoy, 1974; Karabel, 1972; Medina & Neill, 1988; Wilkerson, 1982). Because they are defined in terms of which students of social privilege tend to excel, these measures can be valid assessments of academic ability for only such students; these measures

cannot be valid for all other students (Archbald & Newman, 1988; Bowles, 1971; Carnoy, 1974; Karabel, 1972; Medina & Neill, 1988; Wilkerson, 1982). Defining relative social privilege in terms of socio-economic status (SES), race, and gender (McClelland, 1990) then leads critical theorists to reject the fairness of the cooling-out process for working-class, African-American, and female students (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brint & Karabel, 1989a; Brint & Karabel, 1989b; Karabel, 1972; London, 1978; Zwerling, 1976). Critical theorists hold that the SES, race, and gender of such students are significantly related both to their being in the cooling-out process and to the recommendations and evaluations they receive while within this process.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) explained the inherent unfairness within meritocratic measures of academic ability in terms of cultural capital--the relative value of any group's linguistic and social norms which increases the closer they are to the linguistic and social norms most valued by school personnel. In that community colleges place the most value upon the cultural capital of "the dominant culture" (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 80), all evaluations of academic ability during the cooling-out process from pre-entrance standardized examinations to guidance counselor interviews to professor evaluations are determined by how well students think and speak and write and act like middle-class white males. In this light, the lower a student's cultural capital, the more likely he or she will experience the cooling-out process and the more likely he or she ultimately will be cooled out. Clearly then, critical theorists anticipate that factors like SES, race, and gender are not extraneous from, but are central to measuring academic ability. The cooling-out process from this point of view denies an equitable distribution of educational opportunity for students of less than social privilege, and, thereby, it denies them access to the transfer degree.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, McClelland (1990) argued that students having "similar experiences will not respond to them in the same way . . . " (p. 104). In this case the experience in question is students receiving signals from community colleges during the cooling-out process that the transfer degree is beyond their academic grasp and a terminal program should be pursued. Once receiving any such signals, students of less than social privilege are more likely to lower their aspirations than are their more privileged peers. The latter group is more likely "to be surrounded by images of success, to be able to see the connection between effort and reward, and to believe that they are capable of achieving ambitious goals" (McClelland, 1990, p. 104). Thus, critical theorists not only see measures of academic ability as being biased against certain students within the cooling-out process, but they also see these same students as being ill-equipped to maintain their resolve for the transfer degree. They, therefore, charge that the cooling-out process is no more than another mechanism by which society checks the ambitions of students whose "cultural aspirations clash head on with the realities of the class system" (Karabel, 1972, p. 539). These students are those whose aspirations have been nurtured by the Franklinesque dream of success but whose upward mobility is not easily accommodated within a stratified society; they are those "who have made the mistake of aspiring too high" (Zwerling, 1976, p. 81).

Method and Data Sources

To determine if the cooling-out process denies access to the transfer degree to students from particular segments of society, the following null hypothesis was tested: SES, race, and gender taken independently and in combination are not significantly related to students being cooled out when two confounding variables (academic ability and age) are controlled.

This study drew its sample from students at a Florida Community College who had earned either an Associate of Science degree or an Associate of Arts degree between winter term 1984 and fall term 1991. It was limited to determining the relative fairness of the cooling-out process after students had been placed into one or more college preparatory courses based upon their pre-entrance standardized examination results. This limitation was necessary because these examinations were the only uniform measures of academic ability available. Academic ability needed to be controlled during the study to eliminate SES, race, and gender taken independently and in combination as significant predictors of students being cooled out because these students had less measured academic ability at the outset.

The sampling procedure was stratified according to race to ensure that a meaningful number of African-American students would be included. All 103 African-American graduates who were determined to have been exposed to the initial stage of the cooling-out process were selected. These 103 African-American graduates represented 23.6% of the total 437 African-American graduate population. Also included were 96 white graduates who were

determined to have been exposed to the initial stage of the cooling-out process. These 96 white graduates represented 1.2% of the total 8,118 white graduate population and 10.7% of the 900 white graduates who were randomly selected from the total white graduate population. For both races, the sampled graduates were exposed to the initial stage of the cooling-out process if during registration they identified themselves as intending to earn an Associate of Arts degree, but
then were subsequently placed into one or more college preparatory courses due to their scores on a pre-entrance standardized examination.

SES was defined in this study in terms of the Pell Grant Index Number (PGIN) for all students requesting financial aid; students not requesting financial aid were assigned a PGIN of 7360 which was one integer higher than the highest PGIN of students requesting financial aid. Race was limited to the categories African American or white since the potential sample for all other racial groups was too small to yield meaningful results. Academic ability was defined in terms of a composite index of reading and mathematics scores on the American College Test, Scholastic Aptitude Test, or Computerized Placement Test. Age was identified at the time of first enrollment at the specified community college. Students had been cooled out if after enrolling in the transfer degree program and being placed into one or more college preparatory courses due to low pre-entrance standardized examination scores, they graduated with a terminal degree--the Associate of Science degree. Students had not been cooled out if after enrolling in the transfer degree program and being placed into one or more college preparatory courses due to low pre-entrance standardized examination scores, they graduated with a transfer degree--the Associate of Arts degree.

Results

A logistic regression model was used to test the null hypothesis. Analyses were run with the full logistic regression model, first examining main effects of all predictor and moderator variables as well as interactions between all of these variables. Predictor variables included SES, race, and gender; moderator variables included academic ability and age. A significant relationship between age and being cooled out was determined through these analyses: $x^2 = 10.93$, $p < .001$. This relationship between the probability of being cooled out and the age of students reveals a positive slope indicating that in this study as age increased the probability of students being cooled out increased.

Pedagogical Implications for Community Colleges

The inclusion of age as a moderator variable in this study's analyses had an unintended effect. This study marks the first time in the community college literature that age has been associated with students being cooled out, and it calls into question whether older students in the cooling-out process are being provided fair access to the transfer degree.

By means of this analysis of Burton Clark's cooling-out process as well as my seven years of experience within the community college as an English professor and now as an Institutional Researcher and Planner, I see the full realization of the democratic ideal upon which community colleges are built to be tied to the concept of cultural capital. I think of the dozens of sections of freshman and sophomore English I have taught and wonder what the linguistic and social norms are I value, what the linguistic and social norms are I undervalue due to my having been reared in an all-white small town in southern Indiana, due to my background at a small undergraduate college, due to my traditional family orientation. Most of us--on some level--value in others most what we value in ourselves.

Many of us--on some level--value the pedagogical approaches that were valuable to us as students; many professors teach as they were taught. Many of us began our undergraduate educations while still in our late teens and sat in classrooms filled mostly by students our same ages. Do the pedagogical approaches we use in the classroom lend themselves better to linguistic and social norms of one subculture over another? To a younger subculture? Perhaps to those with a learning style better suited to lectures than to group discussion and tactile experiences? To . . . ? The possibilities go on and on.

A heightened awareness of cultural capital and its interface with the mission of the community college and the mission we establish in our classrooms is needed. This interface can be considered in the light of Burton Clark's cooling-out process and the possibility that older students in the cooling-out process are not being provided fair access to the transfer degree.

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